

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

**KAH BEE CHOW
GOLDEN SLUMBERS
A CRITICAL RESPONSE
BY ANNA SANDERSON**

Kah Bee Chow

Golden Slumbers

31 August 2008, 9am to 9pm

Backyard of 10 Haining Street, Central Wellington

As the centre of Wellington’s Chinatown from the late 1800s – 1940s, Haining Street bore witness to the one of the most violent episodes in Chinese New Zealand history, when Englishman Lionel Terry shot dead Joe Kum Yung in 1905 as a protest against Chinese immigration. Kah Bee Chow’s Golden Slumbers, which occurred on Sunday 31 August, was sited opposite this spot at number 10 Haining Street. The project was partly conceived as an imagined narrative of Joe Kum Yung’s afterlife. Built upon conversations with the present Haining Street community, Golden Slumbers involved the construction of a temporary commemorative garden and soup-kitchen housed in a modest, yet distinctly Chinese, golden marquee. Chow suggests, “Joe was a miner, destitute, alone at the time of his death with long-abandoned dreams of the elusive ‘Sum Gum Saan’, a new gold mountain, the faded promise of the Otago goldfields.”

Commissioned by Enjoy Public Art Gallery

Project Curator: Paula Booker

Anna Sanderson

Last Evening

“About 7.45 o’clock last evening”, reads *The Dominion Post* of September 25, 1905, “an old and apparently quite inoffensive Chinaman named Joe Kum Yung was shot through the back of the head, as he was walking in Haining Street. The bullet seems to have lodged in the brain, and the Chinaman died in the Hospital at 10 o’clock last night.”

It was about 8.00 o’clock when I visited Kah Bee Chow’s mirage-like (12-hour) presence in the usually empty yard at 10 Haining Street, *Golden Slumbers*. On this winter evening in a district of print shops, import export firms, trade suppliers and apartment living, street level was dead.

“It just happened”, Bob Garratt, prior owner of Garratt Print explained, with a feel for the inevitable, of the gradual and now complete extinction of the Haining Street Chinatown spanning the late 1880s to the 1960s.

The light leaking from Chow’s coloured lanterns gave the

greens and pinks of the plants clustered around the gateway of number 10 the muted glow of a hand-tinted black and white photograph. The L-shaped, disused lot, was wrapped around the little brick building once a sub-power station and now a drumming studio. It had been filled by Chow; transformed by decoration, plantings and a makeshift soup kitchen. The artist stood in a white marquee behind two large soup warmers with a fellow server, and like the work, possessed a type of relaxed intricacy.

The tip of the marquee was wrapped in fabric of billowing gold, a stylized evocation of the Sum Gum Saan (new gold mountain) that the Otago goldfields represented to Chinese miners in the 19th century. Underneath, gas heaters roared next to leafless, flowering magnolia saplings. There were tables to sit at, and two televisions on wooden pallets playing interviews Chow had recorded with historians and business people connected to Haining Street.

The corrugated iron wire and concrete walls of the lot had been lined with roughly constructed boxes planted with all sorts of greens: spring onions, parsley, bok choy,

silverbeet, ornamental kale, lightly rooted in topsoil. I heard somebody had said they might tend them after the rest of the work had been taken away. I pulled at a bit of parsley. Its roots tugged out of the soil.

I was shown the plaque across the street which marked the spot where Joe Kum Yung fell. It was a brass disc the size of a dinner plate set into a square of concrete, very similar to the round metal city council drain plates found along the roads.

“Joe Kum Yung Memorial,” the English half of the text read. “Born in Poonyu County, Canton, China. Joe Kum Yung, miner, killed by gunshot 24 September 1905. Remembered Centenary 2005. Absolutely Positively Wellington.”

It was two years now since the plaque had been unveiled by city dignitaries in a Joe Kum Yung Centenary Commemoration, which also featured street theatre, and the lighting of incense in a traditional ceremony to honour his spirit. The hope had been, also, to create some space for Kum Yung in the public imagination, crowded out as he'd been by a fascination for his murderer, Lionel Terry. I'd better feel it, I thought. How could it be felt? It wasn't within my experience, violent death. I only had a sense that there might be a sort of unexpected quietness to it, and heaviness. I had been with a small man who had fainted once. How heavy he'd been!

Back under the tent area, although not hungry, I decided to have a soup.

“To experience the work as fully as possible”, I said to the smiling woman of mullet chic serving it. People stood around, mostly art people I thought, quite practiced at attending this kind of work where the idea was to accept generosity. Of course the warmth and the soup was for everyone, but that non-art, neighborhood people had attended and liked this Sunday soup offering was being remarked on as evidence of the work's reach, a measure of its success.

On the television Sister Catherine from the Suzanne Aubert Compassion Centre and Soup Kitchen which operates six days per week from the adjoining building, related how trainee volunteers are told that “the respect you give people is as important as the food. Remembering, that everybody here is someone's father, brother, husband, son. Fallen on harder times, but as deserving of respect as... the establishment”.

Joe Kum Yung was someone's father, brother husband, son. He was, *The Dominion Post* reported in 1905, “an old man whom Fortune had not smiled on. A miner on the West Coast, and twenty-five years' resident in the colony, he met with an accident, causing permanent injuries to his leg of a more or less disabling character. Unable to follow a mining avocation, and having failed in an attempt to do what was required of him as a raiser of vegetables in Palmerston North, he was dependent altogether on the bounty of his fellow-countrymen, and they were subscribing to send him back to China.”

Chow named the plants: juniper, snowdrop, a flowering cherry called falling snow, chrysanthemums, rhododendron, jasmine. She explained that she had looked for Chinese plants, and that they remained in sacks: here, but still awaiting transplant. I was comfortable looking at these plants. They were the contemplative part of the work, and seemed able to absorb thought like oxygen and affect a kind of transport.

“Historical Haining Street only exists in our heads”, researcher Kirsten Wong proposed. “It's quite pure in this way.” Standing here with my back to the other visitors, I came to an understanding of the description ‘climbing into’ drink. I climbed into the contemplative passages of the work, also as a refuge. The social parts of the work; the soup, the community, a necessary counterpoint perhaps, brought one back from the imaginary.

The historical newspaper reports give us two unbridgeable points: alive, then dead. Joe Duck, “last saw him alive on Sunday. Yung was quite well then, in the day time”. By 10 o'clock that night he was dead, and “through the hole caused by the bullet the witness could put his finger into the brain.”

How many times now has the concrete be re-laid over ‘his’ (as surely it is now his) piece of footpath? If Joe Kum Yung could have been conscious as he met it, of the ‘lastness’ of everything, could the rough, skin-breaking concrete have been felt not as yet another hard surface, but as the surface of the earth, which finally takes ones weight and holds it, comfortingly?

We can enter an imaginary place but of course we cannot be admitted into Joe Kum Yung's experience. We hit here on an impenetrable, unrepresentable kernel of loneliness amongst the proliferating detail of the work. The world can be a lonely place for a spirit. And, says Sister Catherine,

“Loneliness can be ghastly.”

Golden Slumbers seemed to be attempting to compensate for this loneliness, to keep this person, belatedly, company. The space was filled with the trappings of funerary tradition; anecdote, flowers, photos, flames. This is humanity, perhaps. Where we create tender elaborations around exits and exit points. Somebody goes into the ground. One hundred years later, plants spring up. I touched a leaf. It was cold, fleshy and living. How real it felt. I wanted to cling to it as if in a last evening.

Kah Bee Chow

Kah Bee Chow was born in Malaysia and raised in Auckland where she attended the Auckland University of Technology from 2001–2003. Solo exhibitions include *Fallout*, Special Gallery, Auckland (2006) and Chow–Browne, Anna Miles Gallery, Auckland (2005). Recent group exhibitions include *You Are Here*, ARTSPACE Auckland (2008), *Telecom Prospect 2007: New Art New Zealand*, City Gallery Wellington (2007), *The 3rd Auckland Triennial* (2007), *Don't misbehave! SCAPE 2006 Biennial of Art in Public Space*, Christchurch (2006), *Mostly Harmless: A Performance Series*, Govett–Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (2006), *The New Situationists*, Canary Gallery, Auckland (2006) and *The Bed You Lie In*, Artspace (2004).

Anna Sanderson

Anna Sanderson was born in 1970 in Auckland. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in photography and a Bachelor of Arts in English and Art History from the University of Auckland. In 1995 she, with Anna Miles and Tessa Laird, founded and co–edited the art review magazine *Monica*, and much of her published writing since then has been art related. In 2005, Anna studied for a Masters in Creative Writing at Victoria University of Wellington with Damien Wilkins. The resulting manuscript *Brainpark*, a work of non–fiction, was published the following year by Victoria University Press. She lives in Wellington.

Recommended Reading

Kate Brett Kelly–Chalmers, ‘Remaining the Stranger for It: The Public Practice of Kah Bee Chow’, *Public Good: Itinerant Responses to Collective Space*, Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington, 2008

Kah Bee Chow, ‘Lothar of Acropolis: Public Sculpture and the grand splash–splashery of Ben Tankards’ water features’, *Canary Annual '05: Community, Critique and Conversation* (exhibition catalogue), Canary Gallery, Auckland, 2005, pp. 13–16

Tze–Ming Mok, ‘I am not a Reality Show: Fantasy Island, Survivor Island, Exile Island and the Art of Kah Bee Chow’, *Turbulence: 3rd Auckland Triennial 2007*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 2007, pp. 116–117

Laura Preston in *Don't Misbehave: Scape 2006* (exhibition catalogue), Art and Industry Biennial Trust, Christchurch, 2006, pp. 30–31

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